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NSF Funds Illinois Wesleyan Study Into Causes and Impacts of Social Exclusion

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BLOOMINGTON, Ill.— What causes some of us to be ignored or feel isolated, how do these feelings impact us and what can we do about them? Gaining insights into these and other questions related to what psychologists call “social exclusion” will be the subject of a three-year National Science Foundation-funded study conducted by two Illinois Wesleyan psychology professors and their students.

“Persistent and chronic social exclusion has very powerful consequences and impacts,” says Illinois Wesleyan Assistant Professor of Psychology Jason Themanson, who will lead the study. “Profound feelings of depression, loneliness, anxiety and helplessness associated with exclusion can change one’s life, which is why it’s so important to deepen our understanding of the process and the triggers that lead people to feel excluded.”

Themanson’s investigation builds on his own past research and studies by others that have shown strong relationships between neural activity and the feelings of exclusion. Along with co-investigator Professor Joe Williams and student researchers, Themanson will examine patterns of brain activity during simulated social interactions.

The research will explore how perceptions of exclusion come to develop, what types of interactions can lead to exclusion, and what other factors may influence the development of feelings of exclusion. It will also examine the interactions between those who were previously included and excluded, the process by which those who were excluded regain acceptance and the subtle clues or changes in social interactions that lead to exclusion.

The National Science Foundation is supporting this latest research, which will begin in May and run through April 2015, with a grant of \$148,106. Findings will be reported annually and published in scientific journals.

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